

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Alexander Melville Bell, September 29, 1868, with transcript

Copy of a letter written by Alexander Graham Bell to his father. 18 Harrington Square, N. W., London, England, Europe, September 29th, 1868. Dear Papa:

I have felt hitherto that it was perfectly useless for me to write to you — as Mama had been so indefatigable with her pen that there was really nothing left for me to say. Your letters however, plainly show that many of her epistles have never reached your hands. So I think it may not be unacceptable if I give you a resume of the principal events which have happened during your absence. As you have not acknowledged receipt of the second part of my journal I shall send you a condensed copy of it — which you can enlarge upon for yourself — if you have not already received the other. I sent you, per book-post, a critique of V. S. which appeared in the North American Review for July. I believe it is written by Professor Whitney. If you have not received it obtain a copy of the N. Amer. Review. The critique is very important. The substance is somewhat as follows. The author premises that V. S. is one of the grandest of inventions if it fulfils what is asserted of it. And then the writer proceeds to prove that it does not do this. He demolishes your whole vowel scheme as imaginary and no advancement on the pyramidal arrangement — attacks the [??] and [??] as certainly not ‘mixed’ sounds — considers that [??] and [??] more deserve the title of ‘mixed’ since they bring in a new set of organs (“unprovided with a symbol in V. S.”) vig. the teeth in 2 addition to ‘lip’ or point — denies the ‘divided’ character of [??] and [??] and laughs at the idea of placing these sounds in the same category with [??]. He smashes up several of the most important points in the consonant scheme, and ends by discovering that you have made no real advance in the classification of sounds at all. Read the review as it will undoubtedly influence the reception of V. S. in America.

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And now for my “resume.” First concerning business. This has been in what seems to be its usual stagnant condition. Just a sufficient flow to prevent any necessity of drawing — but no more.

I finished the course of twelve lessons with the little boy Smith. His friends were much pleased. They recommended another stammerer, who wrote for a card of terms but has not made his appearance. I had a note from Mrs. Smith to-day (October 2d) to say that her little boy has been going on well since he left me — more than a month ago. Mr. Solomon discontinued his lessons a long time ago as he was going abroad. He paid the balance [???]. A note came for you from your pupil Mr. Hall. He is in South America — and is speaking well though much tried with strangers. A clergyman, Mr. Colby took a course of twelve lessons from me in Elocution [???] [???] [???]. I went to hear him preach a few days ago. [???] [???].

I had a week's holiday at Dover during August. Rather sorry I went. Was introduced to people I would not care to recognize if I went there again.

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On the 31st of August I commenced what has every prospect of being a permanent engagement at Miss Hull's. All the pupils have not returned yet. I have only Nelly and Minna as yet. They are both doing well.

On the 1st of September I visited the Old Kent Road Asylum at the request of Mr. Hawkins who kindly permitted me to go over the working arrangements. I got some new ideas from this — although I am informed that the practical working is not what it might be. On the 14th of September I commenced a new stammerer — [???] [???] — a little boy who comes with his grandfather, Mr. T. J. Hall. This gentleman had some correspondence with you about the boy. A bad looking case. Boy has progressed beautifully. The guardians of the boy, a few days ago paid a visit to his grandfather (maternal) and were very angry to find that he had kept the child from school (by my advice) whilst taking lessons from me.

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“The boy was losing his education! — What would his deceased father have said?! The stammering? Pooh! They could soon cure the stammering! The boy wanted a stout horse-whip ! That's what he wanted.” The grandfather is in great distress about this. He has no legal power and the result is the child will have to return to school next week when he finishes with me. The boy will leave me seemingly quite cured. It remains to be seen what effect school will have upon his newly-acquired and improved habit. He dreads himself returning to school as some ill-natured companions have been continually mocking him. The old gentleman has been 4 present at all the lessons and has been pleased.

September 25th Mr. Fluker returned for a few lessons. Speaks very well indeed. Does not read so well. Paid [???] [???] towards his debt to you. Mr. Timbs called a few days ago on his way to Australia. No trace of a stammer. His brother was to have sent the amount he owes — [???] but it has not made its appearance yet. I had a letter concerning a Deaf and Dumb gentleman asking terms. Not heard anything more of him. Marie wrote some time ago asking me about some Deaf and Dumb children of a friend of hers. There are ten children and only one in possession of all its faculties. The parents are first cousins . If the parents should live in London I said I would be happy to teach the children. Otherwise I recommended that they should be sent to Miss Hull's.

I commenced a new stammerer on Monday 5th October. A fine intellectual young man about 25 — Mr. Weir. Slight impediment and defective [???]. He makes this “[???”]. He will [???] [???] [???] [???] I am to attend Mrs. Hackney's during your absence.

I have had some interesting letters concerning V. S. — two or three from Mr. Prendergast; one from a gentleman concerning the pronunciation of Welsh??; and one from a gentleman — Mr. Robert Arthington who purports to be a missionary but gives no address beyond “Leeds.” He has only heard of V. S. through the Phonetic News. He writes for particulars and evidently wishing to have the book. He has “extensive connections with Missionaries,” 5 and could advance V. S. by using it for unwritten languages — if he is pleased with the system . And proposes making an arrangement with you so that he might

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use it under any restrictions. I sent him a copy of the first pamphlet that he might see what had been said about it — and gave him the names of the other works with prices. I was sorry that you could not answer. I had no doubt you would be willing to entrust the system into the hands of any qualified person who would do good with it — but that I had no authority to permit him to make any other than a private use of it. I offered him an oral explanation if he should come to London.

Since you left I have sold

4 Standards

2 Elocut. Manuals for cash and I have sent

1 Emph. Lit.

1 Engl. V. S.

1 Obs. on Sp.

to Hamilton Adams & Co. 25 Standards

to John Mengies & Co. 4 Vis. Sp. (at 15/-)

to John Meng ies & Co. 12 Letters and Sounds

total 50 books.

So much for business! Now for a resume of general facts! (October 5th) Wait a minute! I find I have not finished business yet! The old gentleman who got you to write a speech for him called again for a “ letter ” concerning his private affairs ([???] [???]). He was greatly pleased . I found him still 6 gushing with the speech ! He spouted some of the most affecting passages to me with oratorical voice and gesture! Interlarding his extracts with “beautiful!” “Doesn't that seem just to flow out of the mouth” etc., etc. Gave first lesson at

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Mrs. Hackney's on Saturday. Commence my new pupil Mr. Weir this evening. He will do well. ([???]). I had a letter on Saturday from a Miss Ashworth — Haverstock Hill, asking you to teach a class of young ladies. I answered. And I have had a note this evening requesting me to call tomorrow (Tuesday) to arrange about terms. So that seems settled. Mr. Radford has written — not knowing you were away — informing you of his having a son and heir. He ordered an Emphasized Liturgy. That makes a total of fifty-one books disposed of. And I suppose Miss Ashworth will have some Standards to bring the total higher.

I have commence attending classes at the University. I have joined the Physiology class under Prof. Sharpey (£3..3..0 half term) meeting daily from 10–11 except on Saturdays; (I now go to Miss Hull's on Saturday instead of Monday from 10 to 11) and also the Anatomy class under Prof. Ellis (4..4..0 half term) meeting from 12–1. My name is entered in the dissecting-room but I won't have a part for a month or so. I have also joined the “College Medical Society.” By paying a guinea a year I have the privilege of taking any of the books home with me and even the bones and preparations o f the society ! I will be thus saved from buying expensive text books.

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My pupils at the present time are

1. Miss Hull's pupils.
2. Mr. Hall's grandson
3. Mr. Fluker.
4. Mrs. Hacknoy's pupils.
5. Master Smith (a finishing lesson)

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6. Mr. Weir.

7. Mr. Colby (Revd.)

8. Miss Ashworth's young ladies prospectively.

Mr. Hall's grandson will finish his course on Thursday the 15th when I will ([???) [???)]. I suppose I will hear nothing more of him until he gets bad again — and when the “ horse-whip ” has failed. He is speaking and reading beautifully. Now I think that is all concerning business — No! not yet! Mr. Tullis, Paper-maker has sent in his account for about £55. If it were paid now it would save you about £2. But Mama does not like to pay any such without your orders — especially as she thinks “perhaps the items may be wrong, and we c an't correct them .” So it must stand over till your return.

I have said so much about business and I have so little time since I commenced studying at the University that I must condense what more I have to say. The house has been in the glooms since you left. I went into your study a few days after and lo! An impudent spider has taken possession of your chair and had built his web over the seat! The wretch was quietly enjoying a fly within an inch of one of your slippers! By the bye! Our old pendant friend the spider has again built his web at the same place in the garden. He has suspended a piece of deadwood and a withered leaf in place of the stone he had last year. Mama began to look pale very soon after your departure, and Grandmama took to complaining that 8 “Eliza was always writing and had no time to speak to her” and “Uncle Aleck” commenced to scan the papers daily with nautical eye for news of “The City of London.” On two occasions the Lat. and Long. were given and then we might have been seen grouped around the globe — not the real one of course — searching for the whereabouts of the absent ones. Soon the Atlantic Telegraph brought us the welcome news of your safe arrival. Mama has busied herself in putting “the den” to rights. (in the absence of the wild beast). She has docketted all your accounts and placed them in order. Letters, etc., have been wrapped in paper to protect them from the dust, and stowed into

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their respective pigeon-holes. Lumber removed. Place made decent. Chair repaired — bottom new-padded and made comfortable, etc., etc. But perhaps I am telling a secret so I better say no more.

On the 8th of August little “Edward Charles Ottaway Bell” was born [??] [??] [??] [??] [??] [??]. We have heard very little from Edinburgh lately, but that little is good. They all seem well. Mrs. Ottaway returns to London on Friday. Grandmama and Mama went to Dover for a short time. I am afraid Mama did not derive much benefit as Grandmama preferred going from house to house to taking the fresh air. Indeed when I joined them during the last week I was astonished to see how much walking-about she could bear. She was in point of fact living in the Past, and forgot her age in the excitement of old recollections. 9 Scarcely a house did we pass but she would know who lived there fifty years ago, and could tell me some story about them. I was terribly afraid of a reaction. And it came at last when we got home. She was so ill we were afraid she was going, and summoned the Doctor. In the midst of this trouble poor Mama found that you were not receiving her letters — and she feared she had been “writing to the winds.” She has been quite ill with worry and excitement till an suspicious mail brought word that you had received some. Now she is more resigned, but we all long very much for “the return of the wanderers.” Grandmama has quite recovered. Aunt Ellen and cousins are all well. Uncle James and cousins ditto. Melly and “family” ditto. F ragments of home ditto. Fragments of home ditto. All friends ditto, ditto. Sophy I believe is in Liverpool to be present at the marriage of Emily Smith. Marie has been with Mr. and Mrs. Parks for some time and I understand *will be in London* shortly. Mr. Bandman has come out in a piece by Lord Lytton “The Rightful Heir.” A pretty good notice in Times. Cut up in Daily News. Bandman brought Miss Milly Palmer here a short time ago as his betrothed !! They desired to be remembered to you. Cathcarts well. Jamie in Glasgow. This account will show you that although business is dull there is no need to hurry home on that account. We have not been obliged to draw even to pay my College fees — and we expect £27..6 next week (Mr. Timbs' £16..16 and Mr. Hall's grandson's £10..10).

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We long to see you again. But still we feel we must not 10 grumble at your wishing to fill your pockets .

Love to Uncle and love to yourself in which Mama and Grandmama would unite but they are in bed and fast asleep.

Au revoir,

Your ever affectionate son, Aleck. (Mama's letter by this mail you will find at 2 Bullfinch Place — as well as a former one and two packets of newspapers). P. S. It is no use hindering more time so I send you as much of the Journal as I have re-written. A. Graham Bell. 2nd P. S. Your old friend Peter MacPherson is dead. 3rd P. S. I have quite forgotten to thank you for the music you sent. The piece is very beautiful. I shall practice it.